

**THE 1<sup>ST</sup> HABIT**  
**PASSION AND**  
**PURSUIT**

Fr. Michael Martin is the director of campus ministry at Duke University. At six-foot-two and wearing his Conventual Franciscan habit, Fr. Mike has a larger-than-life presence. Beginning as freshmen and then throughout their time on campus, Duke students realize just how formidable Fr. Mike is as they get to know him. His homilies are thoughtful, his podcasts funny, and his extroverted personality is welcome in the midst of Duke's high-stress environment.

A few years ago I invited Fr. Mike to lead a team of school administrators in a day of recollection. As president of a Catholic high school here in New Jersey, I routinely brought in guests to lead our team in discussions of education, faith, and organizational excellence. Looking for the perfect speaker, I immediately thought of Fr. Mike. He didn't disappoint.

Fr. Mike said something to our team that I'll never forget: "If your faith is still at the level that it was when you received Confirmation, I feel bad for you." If I had ever said anything like that, it would have come across as condescending and my team would have been resentful. But sometimes a guest speaker can say those kinds of things without anyone taking offense. I suppose this is why consultants have a place in the world!

Fr. Mike's message didn't offend anyone. Rather, it resonated with all of us. In the days that followed, I couldn't help but ask myself whether *my faith* had grown since my Confirmation or whether maybe I was just getting older. *Was I really doing the work of discipleship, or was I just putting in the time?*

Doing the work, when it comes to our faith, has two parts: passion and execution. If you have passion but no plan, your spiritual life isn't likely to be much more than a flash in the pan. You might go from retreat to retreat or from one emotional experience to the next, but you probably won't be transformed.

On the flip side, if you have execution but no passion, you'll be really organized but lack soul. Attending Mass and developing other spiritual practices may become a series of check boxes, activities that are neat and tidy moving parts but empty. You'll

lack the heart of an apostle and become a paper pusher rather than a missionary disciple in love with Jesus.

If Fr. Mike was visiting you, how would you respond to his words? Has *your* faith matured beyond when you were confirmed? The answers to this question lie beneath the 1st Habit for living a more prayerful life: the Habit of Passion and Pursuit.

## PASSION

The word *passion* comes from the Latin word *passio*, meaning “to suffer.” The word was introduced to Christianity in the earliest Latin translations of the Bible. It was typically associated with Christ’s suffering and death on the Cross. In Catholic culture, a suffering Jesus is the centerpiece of religious artwork and imagery. Crucifixes with particularly bloody depictions of Christ became popular around the thirteenth century; in some parts of the world they’re still the norm. Contrast this with the religious imagery of many other Christian traditions and it’s clear—suffering holds a special place in the hearts of Catholics.

If you apply Christian teaching to the suffering we endure in everyday life, the narrative goes something like this: Jesus suffered and life is hard, so *offer it up*. When you do, you’ll be uniting your suffering with the suffering of Jesus. That will make your suffering meaningful, and it will make you a better person.

Growing up, this unspoken message was one I ran away from. Give me a choice between camping or renting an RV and the choice is an easy one. I’ll take the gas-guzzling RV every day of the week. (I mean, come on. Have you seen the size of the flat-screen TVs in those?) What about you? Are you drawn to or repelled by the Christian perspective on suffering? While stories of martyrdom are common even today, most Americans cringe when suffering is mentioned. It’s simply inconvenient and unpleasant. It’s *uncomfortable*.

Living in the most congested state in the nation, we New Jerseyans deal with pollution and traffic as if it's a badge of honor. Here, honking your horn at someone is a sign of respect. But Hurricane Sandy struck our hearts in 2013. For weeks, residents had no power. Gas lines were about a mile long, and I can remember driving to Pennsylvania just to fill up my tank. Those were tough days, and while we all pulled together, we became very aware of just how accustomed we are to Wi-Fi, Netflix, and a quick run to Starbucks. Hurricane Sandy reminded us that, even as gritty New Jerseyans, we'd become *soft*.

Maybe you've felt that way too. Think of the last time you had a cold. Did you wait it out or hurry to make a doctor's appointment so you could ask the physician to prescribe antibiotics? It's telling that often the first question a doctor asks is, "What's your pharmacy?"

## **SUFFERING OR SELF-FULFILLMENT?**

Over the centuries our understanding of the word *passion* has changed radically. Today, *passion* no longer means "suffering" but rather "self-fulfillment." We're raised to "follow our passion," discover our "true passion," and live lives "full of passion."

While this has become our cultural mandate, it doesn't really resonate with most of us. I don't know about you, but my days are mostly filled with ordinary things. Wake up at 6:00 a.m. to take the dog out. Get in the car at 7:00 for the morning car pool. Report for work at 9:00. You get the point—daily life is fairly repetitive, uneventful, even boring. Our culture, however, persists in promoting passion as an end goal.

Rather than an element of suffering, passion is now crowned as the ultimate destination. Consider the cofounder of the most valuable company on the planet, Apple's Steve Jobs. His 2005 speech to the graduates at Stanford University tells you all you need to know about the current obsession with passion: "And

most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. . . . Everything else is secondary.”<sup>1</sup>

This idea didn’t originate with Jobs. It most likely started in 1970 with Richard Bolles, an Episcopal priest who was counseling distressed workers. Collecting some of his prior teachings on work-related advice, he wrote a 168-page book titled *What Color Is Your Parachute?* It became a best seller and spread the notion that happiness and work go together only if you “figure out what you like to do . . . and then find a place that needs people like you.”<sup>2</sup> Today we think of this as run-of-the-mill good advice, but to audiences in the 1970s, it was revolutionary.

Two questions emerge: First, what impact does passion finding have on our spiritual lives? Second, is a passionate life attainable, or is pursuing it a waste of time?

To answer these questions, we can turn to one of the leading voices among those who counter the current “passion narrative,” Georgetown professor Cal Newport. Newport eschews social media. If you email him, he will likely take weeks to get back to you (if he gets back to you at all). His 2016 book *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* has become a favorite among life hackers.

Newport calls the obsession with finding one’s deepest interest the *passion trap*. He describes it this way: “The more emphasis you place on finding work you love, the more unhappy you become when you don’t love every minute of the work you have.”<sup>3</sup>

Put another way, if you’re always trying to find what’s most interesting and enjoyable, you’re likely to be let down. Newport’s work has been bolstered by others such as Daniel H. Pink, a former speechwriter for Al Gore whose books on motivation have become best sellers. Pink argues that *purpose*, more than passion, is ultimately what motivates us: “We know that the richest experiences in our lives aren’t when we’re clamoring for validation from others, but when we’re listening to our own voice—doing

something that matters, doing it well, and doing it in the service of a cause larger than ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>

For Pink, Newport, and others, the exhausting quest for a passionate life isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. A purpose-filled life, on the other hand, is more than it may appear to be.

## **THIRST FOR GOD**

Now before you throw passion out the window, hold your horses. Passion as it relates to prayer might actually be a good thing. Let me show you what I mean.

Passion, when it’s rightly employed, can be a powerful asset in the spiritual life. It might also be described as zeal or thirst. The scriptures are full of passages that help us understand how passion can be integrated into our faith. Psalm 42:2–3 captures this beautifully:

As the deer longs for streams of water,  
     so my soul longs for you, O God.  
 My soul thirsts for God, the living God.  
     When can I enter and see the face of God?

Again, in Psalm 63:2:

O God, you are my God—  
     it is you I seek!  
 For you my body yearns;  
     for you my soul thirsts,  
 In a land parched, lifeless,  
     and without water.

These Old Testament themes are, not surprisingly, complemented by New Testament passages. In John 4, Jesus has a conversation, perhaps the longest recorded conversation in his ministry, with a Samaritan woman. The “woman at the well” is curious about what Jesus can offer her. His reply is telling: ““Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I

shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water’” (vv. 13–15).

The lives of the saints give us concrete examples of those who had what we might call a passionate relationship with the Lord. In the fourth century, St. Augustine taught extensively about the interchange between humanity and God. To him, the highway of prayer formed when God’s passion and ours meet. “Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.”<sup>55</sup>

You may be more familiar with St. Augustine’s famous words: “You made us for yourself, O Lord; our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”<sup>56</sup>

In the fourteenth century, St. Catherine of Siena takes it further: “If you would make progress, then, you must be thirsty, because only those who are thirsty are called: ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.’”<sup>57</sup> In St. Catherine’s mystical writing, *The Dialogue*, she explains further that a passion for God isn’t only desirable but also necessary: “Those who are not thirsty will never persevere in their journey.”<sup>58</sup> When life gets tough, it’s the enduring passion for God that helps us see the forest through the trees. As our busy lives make prayer seem unattainable, this thirst for God is all the more necessary.

My own prayer journey has reflected this. There have been times in which prayer has been accompanied by great waves of emotion and other times in which prayer hasn’t “felt” like much of anything at all. A growing passion for God was the constant.

## A PLACE FOR PASSION

In my life, the depth of prayer became tangible in college. When I wasn’t applying cheap cologne to the doorknobs of my roommates, I was getting to know a place called Caldwell Chapel. It is said that Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen used to pray for hours

at a time in this chapel, and while it may not be on the official campus tour, it became a hot spot for me in those years of young adulthood.

Each day, as classes ended and people retreated to their dorms to study, I would make my way to Caldwell Chapel. Most days, I would read my Bible and journal. It was there, too, that I first discovered Thomas Merton, St. Augustine, and Sheen. I learned that I could sit with the Lord for long periods of time. While some days were a chore, more often than not I found the hour to be doable. Every so often, it was as if God just drew me in and pulled me closer to himself. *Simply amazing.*

Looking back on this, now that life is much fuller and busier with four kids at home, I have fond memories of the hours spent at Caldwell Chapel. It was in the chapel that I can say I felt God's presence. Sometimes my face would grow warm. At other times I could sit for long stretches gazing at the crucifix. This was a season of *feeling* and real learning. My heart and mind were stretching toward God—I was thirsty.

## **BEYOND FEELINGS**

Perhaps you have had a similar season of prayer in your life. Or maybe that kind of experience is yet to come. As often happens, however, this season came to an abrupt end when I graduated and headed off into “the real world.” Prayer became more difficult and quite sporadic. It's not that I didn't have the time. Rather, I lacked the feelings that had so often accompanied my prayers during college. I was experiencing what is often called “spiritual dryness.” For better or worse, it lasted for several years. I dare to say that this is quite common among believers.

Now in my forties, I think that period of dryness *was* a good thing. St. Francis de Sales advised that in prayer we must not seek the consolations of God but the God of consolations.<sup>9</sup> It's easy to be passionate about prayer when it feels good or when life is going smoothly. The point is to maintain a passion for God

even when life is difficult. The seasons of spiritual dryness are very similar to those that occur with your best friend or your spouse. It's not always roses. The discipline is to keep showing up. (We'll take a closer look at that in the next chapter.) Who knew that something as intense as passion could be practiced as a discipline?

Showing up requires a healthy dose of passion, not just the feeling but also the longing. Sometimes prayer will feel warm and breezy, and other times, dry as a bone. *Dos Equis* ads aside, the key is to stay thirsty for God.

Christopher West is considered to be the most recognized teacher of St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body. One of West's most common themes? The "ache of the heart." In a recent review of a popular movie, West put it this way: "We're often afraid to feel that deep 'ache' of our hearts because we intuit that to feel it is to lose control of our nice, orderly lives. Yes, that is correct. In Christian terms, it's called surrender or abandonment to God. Those who have the courage to feel the abyss of longing in their souls and in their bodies and open it up in complete abandonment to the One who put it there will, indeed, have 'messy' lives . . . but messy in a beautifully hopeful way."<sup>10</sup>

As it turns out, the ache, our hunger and thirst for God, constitutes the passion that propels us deeper in prayer.

This leads to the second half of the 1st Habit—*pursuit*.

## PURSUIT

When I first discussed the idea of this book with my wife, Cary, she found the word *pursuit* to be odd. "It feels kind of masculine, like you're trying to accomplish something. Sometimes it's enough just to be yourself before God." I thought, *Why does this woman have to be right all the time?*

Still, passion without execution isn't fruitful.

That's where the idea of pursuit comes in. With respect to prayer, I define *pursuit* as "striving toward God in a thoughtful way." We've already discussed the ache for God. Pursuit is the other side of the coin—a *thoughtful way* to turn the ache into action. That's the *striving* part.

After all, if you just pine for someone and don't tell the person you love them or never invite them to spend time with you, your ache will be for nothing. Likewise, if you just think about God and never try to *live* like God or spend time with him, your effort will only go so far. It's here that James's epistle rings true: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (1:22–24, NIV).

## **ACTION**

Real holiness always flows from intent *and* action; belief *and* behavior. You and I already know this. What we may lack is a consistent teaching to guide us, one that tells us *how* to put our faith into action. The Habit of Passion and Pursuit is ultimately about giving form to the desire each of us has to become holy, to live as sons and daughters of God.

## **INTENT**

Think about it—when you're thoughtful about something, you're more likely to do it well. You're intentional. This applies to almost everything—the last dinner you cooked, the last time you mowed your lawn, the last birthday gift you bought. When we have a goal, and then plan to work toward it, things always go better. When you go into a grocery store and you have a list, you're more likely to get what you need and want (and less likely to wander the aisles gathering a cartful of random items). Each one of us is a "project manager" in this regard.

But what about our prayer lives? Is it okay to look at prayer as a *project* that can be tackled with purpose? Yes and no.

## “PROJECT PRAYER”

Prayer, however, is about relationship, so it’s not the same as other “projects” you might have in your life.

Consider something simple such as cleaning out your garage. You have an end goal: a clean, orderly garage that is used as a place for your car, tools, and more. As a project, it has a starting point—let’s say this Saturday. You know exactly what you’ll need to accomplish the job: trash bags, a broom, time, and, of course, the will to undertake the work. Give it enough time and your garage will be clean. This kind of project is very satisfying, and you can easily cross it off your list. It’s simple.

Other projects are more complicated. In the to-do app on my smartphone I have a project for work called “Recruit New Board Members.” Unfortunately this isn’t as simple as cleaning my garage. To complete this task, which actually doesn’t have an end date, I need to find talented individuals to join our board at work. To make it more complicated, I need to collaborate with other selection committee members assigned to this project. I need them to help me. Then, once we find good candidates, we have to interview and vet each individual. Finally, we need the existing board to then vote on our recommendations. It’s quite a process! And because the selection committee and the candidates change every year, it’s a moving target that requires a deft hand at the wheel.

Your relationship with God has some similarities. You know the end goal: intimacy with Jesus Christ. You acknowledge that you have to put your heart (passion) into it. You know that it will take some time. You also know that you’ll never fully accomplish your goal until you reach heaven. To top it off, you also know that *you* are not the “project manager.”